DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 071 513 FL 003 762

AUTHOR da Costa, B. Gomes
TITLE Language and Area Studies: A Contribution to the Debate.
PUB DATE [72]
NOTE 11p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Area Studies; College Language Programs; *College Majors; *Degree Requirements; Language and Area Centers; *Language Instruction; *Language Programs; Modern Language Curriculum; Modern Languages; Universities
IDENTIFIERS England

ABSTRACT

This article examines the range of language and area studies courses now offered in British universities and polytechnic institutes. Four types of language programs are reviewed: (1) the conventional "culture" model, (2) basic skills courses, (3) joint honors programs, and (4) an area studies model. Advantages of the area studies approach are detailed. (RL)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

B. Gomes da Costa

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

ED 071513

LANGUAGE AND AREA STUDIES: a contribution to the debate

A recent outburst[1] by a traditionalist against alternatives to literature in the undergraduate modern languages curriculum prompts me to examine critically the range of language and area studies courses now offered in universities and polytechnics.

It is helpful to classify language degrees into types. Type I is the conventional "culture" model described by Healey "...for most language departments 'culture' means literary and possibly other forms of artistic culture which may not infrequently include opportunities to become acquainted with the music of the foreign country, or its achievements in the plastic arts or even in philosophy... One commonly found element (is) historical philology... a fairly common pattern for the courses in philology is to be more or less closely integrated with those in mediaeval literature[2]".

However, the methods of teaching living languages have hardly changed in many universities during the century; the task of language teaching is often regarded by the staff as a chore taken in strict rotation and isolated from "scholarship". This is reflected in the relatively slight weighting within the overall exam scheme given to the language papers, to say nothing of their other-worldly content. Yet this is not a criticism of the culture model which is well worth defending and appropriate to our universities.

Type II is that in the Robbins Report[3], para. 414: "Modern languages have an increasingly important role in the conduct of affairs today and there

FL003762

should be much further experiment in this area of study especially in the application of modern techniques. Many more young people would like to be able to speak and read a language fluently and such knowledge is becoming essential in a growing number of occupations. Yet the traditional honours course is not designed to meet their more practical needs and interests. A course involving the study of two or three modern languages with emphasis on standards in oral fluency, translation and interpretation and combined with the relevant background of the countries concerned, would attract these students and would offer them opportunities to develop at a high level their ability to use the languages in fields where skill in the language needs especially to be supported by the knowledge of the background in which the skill is applied".

Practical criticisms can be made of this ideal type: for most students it is impossible to attain high standards of linguistic performance in more than one foreign language at a time. What tends to result is mastery of none - the lowest common denominator. The concept of "knowledge of the background" is educationally suspect. In its "Suggestions For Consideration By Colleges Planning Degree Courses In Languages For Submission To The Council for National Academic Awards", autumn 1967, the Languages Board calls attention to some of the dangers. Para. 4.7 of that document reads: "an alternative which most readily suggests itself to colleges is the combination of language skills with the acquisition of knowledge about the 'life and institutions' of the country (or countries) concerned. It is difficult for the Board to be very explicit here, since the term 'life

and institutions' may cover a wide range of disciplines and topics and may lead to results ranging from extreme scatter and superficiality to other opportunities for considerable specialisation and depth.

"In general, however, the Board views the term with some misgiving and seeks in honours degree proposals, evidence that what is intended is not merely general knowledge involving no appreciable measure of 'theory and cerebration', not merely a wide range of superficial information which largely discards the underlying specialised disciplines like economics, law, politics, geography, etc. to the principles of no single one of which the candidate receives any systematic introduction".

Implicit in type II is the notion of an education for the role of professional linguist. Without anticipating the results of the York University Survey of National Linguistic Manpower Needs, there do seem to be indications that the number of pure linguistic jobs is inadequate; that there is a relatively poor career structure for such jobs; and that the nature of the work carried out by, say, the middle-grade professional linguist may well not be congruent with the role expectation of the graduate.

Type III is the joint honours degree in combined subjects such as French and Engineering, French and Sociology, German and Metallurgy, German and Chemistry etc.. The typical criticism made by the student of these courses is that he feels that he has embarked upon two separate, but equal, mini honours courses and that the curriculum has little opportunity for

making explicit connections between the two halves of the course.

Accordingly, type III may be caricatured as the 'disjointed' honours degree. For instance, a student reading French and Management may remain unaware that the theory and principles of management behaviour developed in the Anglo-Saxon tradition might turn out in practice to be counter-productive, e.g. in a corporation operating in a Gallic social structure. Avoidance of such a situation requires more than goodwill between the co-operating departments; it calls for biculturalism (as defined below) of all faculty members. This latter is rare in traditional subject departments in H.E. institutions. In brief, the joint honours concept seems unlikely to produce bicultural students because biculturalism of faculty has never been required in discipline orientated departments.

Finally there remains a type IV, the area studies model, which is not subject to the above criticisms. The successful area studies student graduates with "executive competencies" which enable him to control and exploit a "host" environment almost as well as the environment in which he was born. This practical biculturalism, so absent from the other models, is the very essence of area studies.

Writing on cross cultural contrasts, Prof. B. S. Corrin stated: "we do not exist in a world with a common fund of ideas - where the ideas are grasped and acted upon in the same fashion by all peoples. The terms such as 'democracy', 'individualism', 'private enterprise', and 'socialism', do have equivalents for translation purposes in many languages. Merely

translating such terms from one language to another is insufficient. Each culture, each nation, uses the meaning of such terms in different ways even when the same language is involved. Translation, therefore, is not necessarily communication. Structure of a language is involved. Structure of a language, moreover, has effects upon particular bodies of knowledge or disciplines. An American mathematician, for example, found that mathematics was more easily understood in French than English, for the terms and explanations possessed a greater precision and clearer order....The rather loose formation and construction of English has meant that social science disciplines have no distinctive boundaries and social scientists have had to develop special terminologies which have limited value to persons outside these disciplines. The historical pattern of Chinese society can find its language structure in ways which have made it difficult for the Chinese to understand values and positions held in the western world.

"In other words, different mores, traditions, operational systems, environments, sociological-psychological cultural patterns, and levels of technological and scientific development in and among groups have interfered with effective communication, which requires the transfer of awareness and understanding of meaning and implications to be drawn from them. Beyond this, there must be comprehension and appreciation of the underlying patterns and values which shape the basis and limits of meaning in a language of any particular society"[4]

To control and exploit a foreign environment one must first develop

effective competence in communication. Typically the humanities-orientated language degrees have deliberately neglected the many complex skills involved in practical communication in a foreign environment. Area studies goes further towards satisfying the objective of communicative competence[5] of which skill in the language per se is only a relatively small part.

Area studies draws on comparative data from both the humanities and the social sciences in an eclectic, but not haphazard way. It analyses and evaluates such data from perspectives which the data themselves illuminate, and it helps to explain the development of areas having a common denominator. This common denominator may be ethnic, religious, historical, linguistic, cultural, national, geographical or social. Whatever the common denominator, area studies makes special reference to efforts to solve the political, economic and social problems of our time.

Of course, one cannot assume sophisticated or systematic knowledge on the part of beginning area studies students about their own society. For this and other reasons problem solving must use comparative data. The solving of problems and the use of comparative data is an antidote to strictly discipline-based education which, particularly in arts and social studies, has requently functioned as "a tool to transmit tribal beliefs, tribal attitudes, tribal structures, tribal skills, tribal habits and tribal knowledge", (Morris Mitchell)

The late Philip Moseley described the purpose of area studies as helping students "see a society, a system of power or an economy or all three inter-acting together, as they do in real life and to see them both in their inter-connections and as a whole".[6]

Moseley seems to describe, without specific reference, some aspect of Oxford Greats. In its heyday Greats exemplified many of the characteristics of type IV without resulting in "extreme scatter and superficiality". Moseley states that "...for several centuries the interdisciplinary study of ancient Greece and Rome provided the central core for the training of minds in the west, and classical training today has high prestige in Britain and France. In addition to mastering grammar and vocabulary, a student of the classics must understand the philosophy and logic, the literature and history, the political, economic and social institutions, the religious beliefs and military strategy of the ancient world and, above all, the inter-connections between them. The peculiar feature of classical studies is that they deal with a civilisation which in its fully developed form seemed relatively stable for several centuries and which can no longer be studied in situ today.

"In contrast, area studies aims to study and interpret living societies all of which are developing some slowly, some tempestuously, but none without profound implications for the future of mankind".[7]

An integral part of area studies is a lengthy period of, say, minimally 12 - 15 months spent actively in situ, i.e. largely in gainful employment

but also in private, supervised research and study leading to the completion of a project. Accordingly, the student masters the problem of becoming bicultural from two complementary perspectives which are necessary conditions for biculturalism. First of all, at the theoretical level, he approaches the comparative study of another civilisation by using the social anthropologists concept, "style". He explores how a particular culture attempts to meet problems peculiar to itself and problems common to all societies. Secondly, in order to survive in a foreign culture he must arrive at an understanding of the "other's" (in a sociological sense) definition of the situation through a process of trial and error-elimination. Since he works for an economic wage and is engaged in systematic field work for a project, he gains first hand experience of what, e.g. French people believe and how they perceive, act, feel and express themselves in a range of social, political and economic situations.

So much for the sociological definition of biculturalism. Lambert's socio-linguistic definition of biculturalism is also germane to students of language and area studies: "...an individual successfully acquiring a second language gradually adopts the various aspects of behaviour which characterise members of another linguistic cultural group. The learner's ethnocentric tendancies and his attitudes towards the other group are believed to determine his success in learning the new language... The more proficient one becomes in a second language the more he may find that his place in the original membership group is modified at the same time as the other linguistic group becomes something more than a reference group for him. It may become a second membership

group for him".[8]

If we take a hypothetical student of French Area Studies, it cannot be assumed that the French will automatically become a second membership group for him. His experiences must be appropriately structured. His time in France is, therefore, best broken up into two stages. An attempt can be made to minimise the jolt of "culture shock (which) is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs and cues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people, when and how to give tips, how to give orders to servants, how to make purchases, when to accept and when to refuse invitations, when to take statements seriously and when not. Now these cues which may be words, gestures, facial expressions, customs or norms, are acquired by all of us during the course of growing up and are as much a part of our culture as the language we speak or the beliefs we accept. All of us depend for our peace of mind and our efficiency on hundreds of these cues, most of which we do not carry on the level of conscious awareness".[9] Only when this state of affairs is almost true of our hypothetical student when he is in France as it is when he is in the United Kingdom have we fulfilled our educational objective, biculturalsim, and imparted to the student a range of skills which add up to communicative competence. For "when an individual enters a strange culture, all or most of these familiar cues are removed. He or she is like a fish out of water. No matter how broad minded or full of goodwill you may be, a series of props has

been knocked out from under you followed by a feeling of frustration and anxiety."[10]

CONCLUSION

A well thought out area studies curriculum[11] at degree level

(i) imparts to the student a grasp of contemporary problems and encourages him actively to seek solutions by applying the theory, methods and research techniques of both the social sciences and humane studies;

(ii) culminates in broad, interdisciplinary, practical competencies;

(iii) includes the opportunity to opt for those areas or problems to which the student has a deeper personal commitment;

(iv) optimally should include a phased communication training cycle,

e.g. a) intensive language training at home;

b) immediate follow-up by further intensive in-country language training at the end of which the student can communicate and feel liberated from the gross effects of culture shock so that he can

c) spend a further year or so in his area in the pursuit of research for a project, in gainful employment and in the further refinement of his overall communicative skills.

FOOTNOTES

1. Prof. Nicklaus, Exeter University, as reported in T.H.E.S. 20th October, 1972.

2. F. G. Healey. "Foreign Language Teaching in the Universities", MUP 1967 p.8

3. Higher Education: Report of the Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961-63. 1963. Cmnd. 2154.

4. B. S. Corrin. "Research on Values and Uses of Foreign Languages for Instruction and Study in the Social Sciences", USOE, HEW, Baltimore, USA 1962 (mimeo).

5. "Communicative competence" is not here used as in transformational generative grammar.

6. in H. H. Fisher (ed) "American Research on Russia", Bloomington, USA, 1959, pp.10-11.

7. H. H. Fisher, loc cit.

8. Wallace Lambert. "Psychological Approaches to the Study of Language", in J. Michel. "Foreign Language Teaching" p.241 N.Y. 1967.

9. K. Oberg, quoted in H. Cleveland et alii. "The Overseas Americans", New York, 1960.

10. K. Oberg, op. cit.

11. This conclusion owes much to a group of my colleagues in the Department of Arts and Modern Languages at the North East London Polytechnic who have spent over a year developing a course in French Area Studies which, it is hoped, will be approved by the C.N.A.A.